

# Love Actually

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## SUBMIT TO ONE ANOTHER

Today I thought we'd begin with a dance! Don't worry – we'll have a demonstration of a couple dancing together!

Now it may surprise you to know that I'm not an expert when it comes to dancing, but I think I am right in saying that when a couple dance together, one of the couple leads! If this is true, which I think it is, then it means that the other person must follow. As far as I'm aware it would normally be that the man is the one who leads, and it is the woman therefore who follows. I've never been a judge on a dancing competition, but I think that a good dance would be one where you couldn't tell which of the couple was leading and who was following! A good dance would be one where a couple danced as though they were one, even though one was leading and one was following!

Who is a famous dancing couple you know? Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers? They danced in many films together becoming well known for the quality of their dancing. Ginger Rogers was once interviewed on the Nightline programme in the US sometime after Fred Astaire had died. She said in that interview that "Fred Astaire was so good a dancer that when they danced together, he never seemed to be leading and she following".<sup>1</sup> And of course when you watch them dance together, it seems as if you are watching one person! There is fluidity, seamlessness in their movement, an elegance that most of us can only dream about.

Friends, did you know that you can dance? Truth is you can dance like Fred and Ginger. You can dance with fluidity, seamlessness and elegance. But your dance isn't on a dance floor, or in a film. Your dance is a dance in a broken world. Your dance is a dance in the relationships you have day by day. Your dance is danced in this thing we call church.

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<sup>1</sup> Sittser, Gerald, *Love One Another*, IVP 2008 ed. page 37

God's dream is for the dance of life to be a dance like Fred dancing with Ginger. Relationships that are full, harmonious, healthy and whole. God wants us to participate in the dance that he enjoys. We are invited to dance with him and dance with those he's given us – the people around us! Friends, everyone can dance! We are called to dance in a broken world.

I remember when Steve organised "Strictly Fun Dancing" evenings! On one of those evenings people gave money for me to learn to waltz, and for a while, with Jenni's help I could waltz. But while I was learning I kept getting the steps wrong and treading on Jenni's feet, or tripping over my own. Any of you who've ever had dancing lessons will know what I mean!

Friends, in a broken world, our dance has lots of treading on toes, tripping over feet, or pulling in opposite directions. In a broken and fallen world where relationships are broken at all levels of society and in all institutions, we find disunity rather than harmony, brokenness not wholeness. Anyone here the perfect dancer? Anyone here whose relationships are all perfect? In a broken world, we need to learn how to dance. The way we do it is mutual subjection!

Mutual subjection is God's way of nurturing harmony in a discordant world. It is his way of nurturing unity in a broken relationship. It is his way of bringing healing in a sick world. It is his way of nurturing love in a broken church. We've talked a lot about living in second choice worlds. Broken worlds means that we live in second choice worlds. Second choice worlds are situations and circumstances that we would not choose. It is living in the world as it is, not in the world as we want it to be. Truth is, for most of us, for most of the time, the world is not the way we would choose it to be.

Anyone here perfect?

Thought not...mutual subjection is applicable for imperfect people...that's you and me!

- Anyone belong to an imperfect family?
- Anyone work in an imperfect job?

- Anyone belong to an imperfect organisation?
- Anyone go to an imperfect church?
- Anyone married to an imperfect spouse?
- Anyone a parent of imperfect children?
- Anyone work for an imperfect boss?

Mutual subjection shows us how to be in an imperfect world where tension and conflict run in community.

I play lots of different roles in life; Minister, husband, father, son, brother, uncle, friend, Chair of Governors, Chair of Easter Team, volunteer, moderator, colleague, leader, follower. In each of those roles I come into contact with lots of different people and take on different tasks and challenges. Not every task is fulfilling; not every person is wonderful; not every meeting goes as planned; not every situation turns out as I'd hoped. It is Mutual subjection that provides the help I need to function well and responsibly in communities that do not always work well.

Being subject to one another is about working well and fruitfully in the social order of the world as it is! This is the only one of the mutuality commands that speaks to living well within the social order. And it's a challenge because it is very counter-cultural today. We would rather stand up for our rights than to submit to another. Perhaps because we have become wary of those who appear to have power in any situation. The problem with power is that it can be and often is, a platform for some kind of abuse. History is full of examples where those in power have used their status to dominate others, and of course, it is still happening today.

Sadly it is no less true of the church where the Bible itself has been used to justify the misuse of power – slavery would be one example. Tragedy is, all this is a long way from what it means to submit to one another.

“In essence, to be subject to one another implies that we acknowledge the necessity of social order, accept our place within it, and transform the social order

through the power of radical obedience and sacrificial love.”<sup>2</sup> Order is part of the world as God created it. There was an order to creation that provided the setting to what was created next. People were the pinnacle of that creation, put on earth to enjoy and cultivate what God had generously given. God proclaimed that everything he had made was very good! There is nothing inherently wrong with order. In truth, we can’t live without it. But we do live in a fallen world which affects both the natural order and the social order.

What is good, has become perverted and distorted: marriages break down; children rebel; parents neglect; employers advance their own interests at the expense of employees; people undermine authority; churches fail; ministers fall, preach lousy sermons, get defensive when criticized; congregations want to be entertained, they don’t volunteer, criticize...

There is evidence of a fallen social order everywhere! Mutual subjection is what enables us to live well in social order without a spirit of resignation or rebellion. It means we live within the social order but strive to change it through the power of sacrificial love. We learn to dance together!!

“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church— for we are members of his body. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband. Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. “Honor your father and mother” —which is

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, page 40

the first commandment with a promise— “so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.” Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord. Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free. And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him.” (Eph. 5 v 9 – 6 v 10)

What Paul writes here was radical in his day! Still is! First thing to note is that this is spoken to everyone! Verse 21 makes no distinction – this is for everyone: be subject to one another. That would have shocked Paul’s readers, after all he was writing to: husbands and wives who knew their place; parents and children who knew their place; masters and slaves who knew their place!

Maybe it shocks you.

- If you’re a husband, be subject to your wife!
- If you’re a parent, be subject to your children.
- If you’re a boss, be subject to your employees.
- If you’re in a position of power, be subject to those over who you exercise power!

But this is also true:

- If you’re a wife, be subject to your husband.
- If you’re a child, be subject to your parents.
- If you’re an employee, be subject to your employer.
- If you are in a place where someone rightly can exercise power over you, be subject to them.

The point and challenge in what Paul says, is that to be subject is a choice. It is a choice not about position, but about how we will be in that position. So how do you live, what choice do you make?

Second thing to note is that those with greater “position” have greater responsibility. Husbands love your wives as Christ loved the church. Christ loved the church with sacrificial love – he gave his life. Jesus said: if you want to be a leader, you must become a servant! This command to be subject to one another is for everyone, but we live it out in our different roles.

Thirdly, we are to be subject to one another “out of reverence for Christ.” God himself in Jesus became subject to us. Philippians 2 reminds us that Jesus gave up all the glory of heaven and came to live among us, as one of us. He chose not to hang onto the power that was rightfully his, but he gave it up to become our servant. He humbled himself to the extent that he chose to die like a criminal that we might be free. Then God exalted him to the highest place.

Mutual subjection means we are prepared to put our rights and privileges at risk and trust Jesus himself to act on our behalf. We trust ourselves to the risen Christ and so we don’t have to lord it over others or defend ourselves and our rights. We choose to live like Jesus did, and trust ourselves to God. By choosing the way of mutual subjection, we choose to say that we trust God is always working for good in everything, even when we can’t see it or understand it. We don’t wait until things are perfect, or the way they should be or we want them to be. We choose now, in the world as it is, a broken, second choice world to be subject to one another, because that is the way of Christ. We choose to allow God to work in and through us to bring about the transformation that every society needs, and we choose to say that that transformation begins with us and in us in mutual subjection.

This does not mean we never challenge or disobey authorities. It is possible to confront evil and do it in a spirit of subjection. It is possible to disobey authority and honour it at the same time. We are encouraged to resist evil and do good:

“Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone.” (Romans 12 v 12 – 17)

Jesus himself did exactly that.

By 2015 we will naturally be radical followers of Christ: Enjoying each other.

To be subject to one another is certainly radical.

So...what do you say...shall we dance?

Preached in Crawley Baptist Church, on Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> January 2011 by Rev. Ian Phillips.